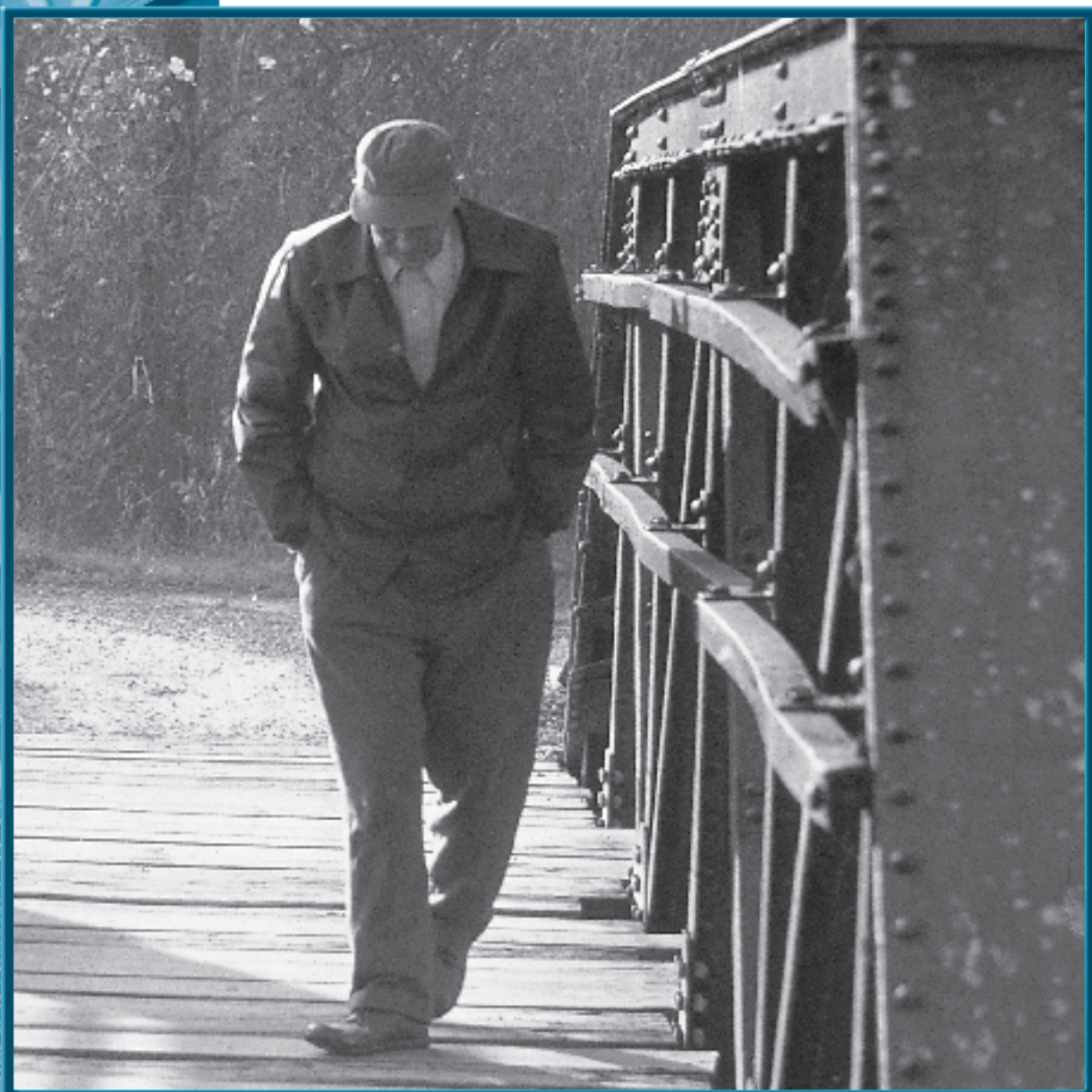


Chapter

3

American Masters: Whitman and Dickinson



American Masters:

Whitman and Dickinson

John Malcolm Brinnin

The following essay provides highlights of the contributions made by Whitman and Dickinson to American poetry. For a more detailed version of this essay, see *Holt Literature and Language Arts*, pages 302–305.



Reading Standard 3.5a–c
Analyze recognized works of American literature representing a variety of genres and traditions.

The two greatest American poets of the nineteenth century were so different from each other, both as artists and as personalities, that only a nation as varied in character as the United States could contain them.

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) worked with bold strokes on a broad canvas; Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) worked with the delicacy of a miniaturist. Whitman was sociable and loved company, a traveler; Dickinson was private and shy, content to remain in one secluded spot throughout her lifetime.

- 10 While both poets were close observers of people and of life's daily activities, the emphasis they gave to what impressed them was so distinct as to make them opposites. Whitman was the public spokesman of the masses and the prophet of progress: "I hear America singing," he said, and he joined his voice to that chorus. Dickinson was the homebody, peering through the curtains of her house in a country town, who found in nature metaphors for the spirit and recorded them with no hope of an audience. Whitman expected that his celebration of universal brotherhood and the bright destiny of democracy
- 20 would be carried like a message into the future. Dickinson expected nothing but a box in a dusty attic for the poetry that was her "letter to the World."



WORD STUDY

The word *miniaturist* in line 7 refers to a person who paints small, delicate portraits. What kind of poet might be called a miniaturist?

COMPARE & CONTRAST

Re-read lines 12–24. How do Whitman's and Dickinson's expectations about their audiences differ? Underline the answers.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 33. What is the title of Whitman's famous book of poetry? Underline the answer.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 34–38. Underline the metaphor that states the difference between Whitman and Dickinson. According to the text, which poet's use of words is "slightly uneven"?

IDENTIFY

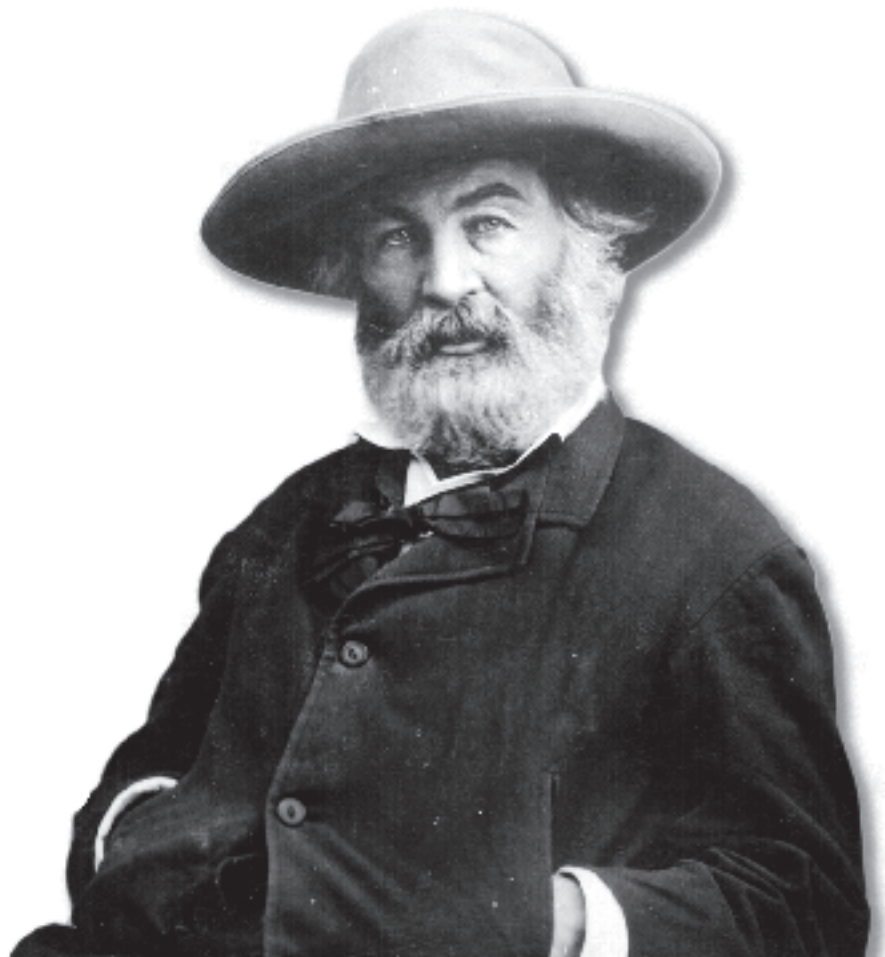
What is *cadence*? What is *free verse*? Underline the definitions.

Two Seams in the Fabric

Whitman's career might be regarded as another American success story—the story of a pleasant young man who drifted into his thirties, working at one job after another, never finding himself until, at his own expense, he boldly published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. The book made him famous around the world.

Dickinson's career as a poet began after her death. It is one of those ironies of history in which a writer dies unknown, only to have fame thrust upon her by later generations of readers.

Whitman and Dickinson represent two distinct seams in the fabric of American poetry, one slightly uneven and the other carefully measured and stitched tight. Whitman was as extravagant with words as he was careless with repetition and self-contradiction. He filled his pages with long lists and strained to catalog everything in sight. His technique is based on **cadence**—the long, easy sweep of sound that echoes the Bible and the speeches of orators and preachers. This cadence is the basis for his **free verse**—poetry without rhyme or meter.



Dickinson, on the other hand, wrote with the precision of a diamond cutter. She was always searching for the one right phrase that would fix a thought in the mind. Her technique is economical, and her neat stanzas are controlled by the demands of rhyme and by the meters she found in her hymn book.

Models for Future Poets

As the history of our poetry shows, both Whitman's and Dickinson's styles have continued to be used by American writers. Both poets have served as models for modern poets who have been drawn to the visions Dickinson and Whitman fulfilled and the techniques they mastered. Poetry as public speech written in the cadences of free verse remains a part of our literature; poetry as private observation, carefully crafted in rhyme and meter, still attracts young writers who tend to regard poems as experiences rather than statements.

Whitman and Dickinson together mark a turning point in American poetry.



IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 43–47. What influenced Emily Dickinson's use of meter? Underline the answer.

CONNECT

Why are Whitman and Dickinson such important poets?

[illegible]

Chapter 3

OBJECTIVES

Students will—

- Compare and contrast two poets.
- Analyze two different poetic styles.

American Masters: Whitman and Dickinson

Interactive Reading, pages 124–127

NOTE

Instruction and teaching tips for this historical essay are available in *Holt Literature and Language Arts ATE*. Below are additional ideas for teaching the shortened, interactive version.

Introduce

- Tell students that this essay introduces the two greatest American poets of the nineteenth century—two people who were as different from each other as night is from day.
- Write the poets' names and dates on the board—Walt Whitman (1819–1892), Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)—and ask students what major trends or events occurred in the United States during these poets' lifetimes. Elicit responses that include westward expansion, population growth, and the Civil War. Then, suggest that as they learn about Whitman and Dickinson, students consider how each poet was affected by these events.

Teach

- Read the three opening paragraphs aloud, and elicit responses from students to the first two sidenotes (page 125).
- Direct students to finish reading the essay independently, responding to the sidenotes as they read.

Assess and Extend

- Remind students of the question asked earlier about how events of the nineteenth century might have influenced two different poets. Which poet do they expect to reflect the public life of the American people? [Whitman] Which poet do they expect to focus on personal, private concerns? [Dickinson]
- Assign the “Write About” activity in *Holt Literature and Language Arts*, page 305.



Reading Standard 3.5

Analyze recognized works of American literature representing a variety of genres and traditions.

American Masters: Whitman and Dickinson



American Masters: Whitman and Dickinson



Reading Standard 3.5a-c
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would be carried like a message into the future. Dickinson expected nothing but a box in a dusty attic for the poetry that was her "letter to the World."



WORD STUDY

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IDENTIFY

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Whitman and Dickinson together mark a turning point in American poetry.



IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 43–47. What influenced Emily Dickinson's use of meter? Underline the answer.

CONNECT

Why are Whitman and Dickinson such important poets?

Sample response:

They have had a

lasting influence

on poets who came

after them.